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Chronology of Events Leading Up to Recommendation for a new Main Library

The present Main Library building is too small, unsafe and antiquated. Dedicated in 1917, the Main Library was built to hold 500,000 volumes. Today it is dangerously overcrowded with over one million volumes.

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- The building cannot accomodate any new services and the Library has had to move out some of its existing collections and turn down gifts of new collections.
- Overcrowding in the stack areas makes the building extremely vulnerable to fire. There are no fire exits on the north side rear of the building.
- The steel structure housing the main stack area has begun to sag from too much weight.
- Poor ventilation, lighting and a lack of office space create an unhealthy environment for staff.
- The electrical system has reached its capacity.
- Stacks in Art and Music are not accessible to the handicapped. Handicapped access into other stack areas is extremely difficult to use.

1944 City Librarian announces to the Library Commission that the Main Library has reached its capacity of 500,000 books.

1957 Major criticism voiced against the library system by newspapers, public complaints and a Grand Jury investigation. Library Commission votes to retain Emerson Greenaway to survey the library and outline the steps needed to provide San Francisco with an adequate library system.

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1970 Arthur D. Little and John S. Bolles report further documenting the need for a new Main Library and developing a program of facility requirements for the future.

1974 Performing Arts Committee announced plans to build a symphony hall on Marshall Square. Library supporters convinced the Board of Supervisors to save Marshall Square for the new Main Library.

1975 City Librarian forms Library Planning Committee to initiate a Library Master Plan and Bond Issue proposal. Library Commission votes to submit a bond issue to the voters for a new Main Library on Marshall Square. Proposal withdrawn.

1978 Engmann and Smulyan report on citizen attitudes towards the Library finds major support for a bond issue to build a new Main Library.

1982 Lowell Martin development plan for the Library. Report suggests reorganization of branch system and calls for new Main Library building.

1984 Robert Rohlf consultation on plans to develop an addition to Main Library building. Finds building unusually inefficient and dysfunctional and strongly recommends construction of a new building.

1985 Report by Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum conducted for the Chief Administrative Officer. Recommends that Main Library building is obsolete, renovation and expansion would be inadequate and calls for the construction of a new Main Library building.

1985 San Francisco Library Commission adopts resolution calling for a new Main Library building on Marshall Square.

1985 San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously adopts a resolution calling for a new Main Library on Marshall Square.

1986 Becker and Hayes, Inc and Omni-Group determine the functional and space requirements for the Main Library for the next 20 years and detail a plan for building a new Main on Marshall Square. The plan calls for an approximate doubling of space, 346,000 gross square feet, to be included in a building consisting of one below ground and five above ground floors.

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1987 Library Commission forced to temporarily close public stacks in response to directive from the Fire Marshall. Main Library building closed for two days while staff move 30,000 books out of the building to an off-site storage location.

1987 Brunnier report on the structural capacity of Main Library building. Determines structural work which would be required in order to bring the building up to current San Francisco Building Codes.

1987 Skidmore, Owings and Merrill alternative uses study of the Main Library building. Evaluates five major types of alternative uses: museum, office, conference center, performing arts and mixed cultural uses. For each type of use a generic program is determined and evaluated according to their fit within the building and their cost. The report concludes that the best of the uses considered would be a museum, next best would be a mixed cultural use.

1987 Esherick Homsey Dodge and Davis report on re-use of the Main Library building as a courthouse. The report concludes that the Main Library is "unusually adaptable" for courtroom use because of its location, its classical style, size of the rooms and the space for an addition at the 45 Hyde Street site.

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